

Transition to Renewable Energy: Legislation Puts Clean Air and Vulnerable Communities First

GLADYS LIMON, [GUEST COMMENTARY](#), | AUGUST 7, 2018, 10:07 AM EST

A number of California's natural gas power plants are located in low-income communities of color. For decades, these communities have unjustly carried the burden of powering our state and paid the highest price — [their health](#) — for dirty energy. The good news is that, according to [an analysis just released by the Union of Concerned Scientists](#), California can retire a significant amount of natural gas generation because it is no longer needed. The bad news is that as California increases its reliance on renewable energy, an unintended consequence is that existing natural gas plants could get dirtier.

The UCS analysis also found that without an alternative to natural gas to meet evening electricity needs when the sun goes down and solar generation subsides, plants not retired are likely to turn on and off much more frequently. This “cycling”—can result in up to 30 times more nitrogen oxide pollution (NOx, a cause of smog) per hour than continuous operation. So even as total greenhouse gas emissions are dropping because we are relying on more renewable energy, communities near natural gas plants could see increased pollution that poisons their air. It's crucial that air quality regulations limit these poisonous spikes and we prioritize clean energy alternatives and phase out all fossil fuel power plants as soon as possible.

[California Senate Bill 64](#) (SB 64, Weickowski), currently under consideration by the California Legislature, is a step in the right direction. It would require the California Air Resources Board to publish data on the hourly change in emissions, startups and shutdowns of natural gas plants in the state. SB 64 would also require state agencies to work together to identify ways to reduce global warming and air pollution emissions, placing a priority on reducing emissions in communities most impacted by air pollution. While we need to phase out natural gas power plants by bringing more renewable energy onto our electricity grid, we must not allow the transition to unjustly impose further burdens on communities that have been polluted by our energy system. SB 64 is a necessary safeguard to help prevent low-income communities of color from continuing to sacrifice their health for the greater good.

Lily Bello, a youth leader at [CAUSE](#) is one of many youth who testified before the California Energy Commission in October 2017 to oppose the building of the Puente Gas Plant in Oxnard. She said, “I’m somebody who lives in Oxnard, who

spends their entire day here, and I have asthma. I've missed out on so much of my childhood because I could not breathe. I just recently found out that power plants cause asthma. It's a reality. It affects us.... my life should be a little bit more important than the [money] put in a billionaire's pocket.”

Like Lily, I also grew up in Oxnard. As a young girl I often visited a beach near my home over which a behemoth power plant loomed. Decades later, I fought as an attorney to stop the construction of Puente – yet another power plant planned on this “industrial beach” – together with Oxnard’s youth who refused to allow their community to serve as a dumping ground. After years of struggle, the proposal for the Puente power plant was suspended in January 2018 by the California Energy Commission and effectively died, granting the community a chance to reclaim their beach – and breathe easier.

We must continue to hold the line and say *no more* to air pollution from gas fired power plants, and *yes* to a future that is clean, renewable, rooted in the leadership of our communities, and that creates a worker-centered transition to a new energy economy. The good news is we have the solutions in hand, illustrated by our recent victories in bringing rooftop solar energy to multifamily affordable housing ([SOMAH](#)) and net metering.

Two California Public Utilities Commission’s ([CPUC](#)) actions have also recently put us on the right path. One is analysis the CPUC conducted as part of the [Integrated Resource Plan proceeding](#) that concluded there is no need for new gas-fired capacity through 2030. A second is a CPUC ruling that ordered PG&E to seek proposals for solar, demand response, or energy storage to avoid renewing contracts with three Calpine gas plants to provide local grid reliability needs. This is a key step that can minimize the need to depend on gas in certain areas for local grid needs, instead providing energy from cleaner sources and battery storage. Now is the time for the us to work towards furthering the retirement of old plants and stop building new ones.

The [California Environmental Justice Alliance](#) (CEJA) and our member organizations work with communities that are the most affected by natural gas power plants: they must be prioritized in the clean energy economy. That’s why at CEJA we promote community-owned energy resilient systems as a critical step towards retiring natural gas plants — both by large-scale solar and storage models, as well as decentralized and distributed energy systems. These systems can create opportunities to build wealth through ownership, clean and renewable energy for the neighborhood without the need for firing-up a gas plant, and badly needed jobs to implement these solutions. We must increasingly demand public investment and prioritization of community-owned energy resiliency systems such as microgrids, solar and storage, and emergency energy systems in disadvantaged communities.

Our transition away from fossil fuels and toward a renewable energy economy must be smart and just. SB 64 is an important step to ensure that

environmentally disadvantaged communities, such as Oxnard, also benefit from our state laws that seek to improve the quality of life of all Californians. By creating more transparency and accountability about our natural gas plants, we can both better hold our regulators and energy producers accountable, and work toward cleaner air for communities of color. Indeed, by passing SB 64, California, as a whole will continue on its path of being a national leader in taking on climate change.

Gladys Limon is Executive Director of the California Environmental Justice Alliance (CEJA), where she brings 15 years of experience in legal, policy, and community-based work for environmental justice and civil rights. CEJA is a statewide, community-led alliance that works to achieve environmental justice by advancing policy solutions, uniting powerful local organizing in low-income communities of color most impacted by environmental and growing the statewide movement for environmental health and social justice. Previously, Ms. Limon was an attorney at Communities for a Better Environment pursuing high stakes environmental justice cases in southern California, and with the Mexican-American Legal Defense Education Fund, litigating cases concerning anti-immigrant laws, racial discrimination, and the rights of low-income immigrant workers.